

The Journey of Isser Singh: A Global Microhistory of a Sikh Policeman

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Isser Singh served as a constable in the Shanghai Municipal Police in the early twentieth century. This paper investigates the socio-economic context of his emigration to Shanghai and his experience there. In so doing, it seeks to find an alternative way to understand the emerging Sikh diaspora during the colonial period. For the last four decades, scholarship on the Sikh diaspora has been influenced either by the motherland-settlement narrative structure or by the Eurocentric paradigm. A review of previous studies demonstrates that both approaches are highly problematic. By taking a transnational as well as a microscopic perspective, it is hoped that the present study will recover important aspects of the Sikh diaspora as it emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and which have been overlooked in previous scholarship.

Introduction

When studying the Sikh diaspora, more often than not, scholars tend to select one specific country or region to elaborate the formation and development of the Sikh community there. Therefore, topics such as the Sikhs in Canada, America, Australia, Malaya and so forth are not uncommonly seen.¹ One shared feature for these works is that they all underline a linear relationship between the Sikh motherland, the Punjab, and the overseas communities. For example, in his early study on the Sikhs in England, A. W. Helweg repeatedly contends that the Sikhs in Europe were deeply influenced by historical process of the Punjab. In other words, what had happened in the Punjab, whether it was economic hardship, political turmoil, or religious reform, inherently shaped the landscape of the Sikhs in England.² Dashan Singh Tatla, in his annotated bibliography, argues that overseas Sikh communities also imposed significant influence over their hometown. The Sikhs in North America, for example, not only remitted large sums of money to help the development of the Punjab, they also brought political ideologies, the Indian nationalism in particular, back to India to effect the political process.³ For these practitioners, the Sikhs overseas were merely shadows of their countrymen in the Punjab. The linear interaction between the Punjab and the overseas community has been regarded as the key to understand the Sikh diaspora.

Most Sikh diasporic studies that anchor in the mutual interaction between the Punjab and the settlements abroad, however, fail to take the transnational network that facilitated the migration of the Sikh population into account. In other words, the diasporic experience of the Sikhs could not be fully

comprehended by merely referring to a linear structure that only includes the start point and the destination. To address this predicament, scholars in this field have gradually turned their heeds to the transnational history.

The past three decades have witnessed the rise of the transnational history (some scholars also designate it as global history or world history), as more and more practitioners have begun to investigate how circulation of commodities, institutions, large human groups and knowledge shaped certain historical process.⁴ Influenced by this approach, Tony Ballantyne contends that the Sikh diaspora in the modern world was a process that had been activated by transnational networks. The cross-boundary circulation of personnel, institutions, and information shaped main features of Sikh communities from one country to another.⁵

Whereas the transnational approach seems to be a practicable prescription for the stereotyped motherland-settlement dichotomy in the studies of the Sikh diaspora, some other challenges have been left behind. Scholarships on the Sikh diaspora have long been affected by the Eurocentric paradigm. When explicating the background of the Sikh migration in the late nineteenth century, scholars tend to highlight the British influence. The British theory of martial race is usually associated with it.⁶ Heather Streets contends that the main reason for the overseas employment of the Punjabi Sikhs was that they were tagged by the Government of India as the martial race who were particularly adept in military related occupations. Furthermore, the urgent needs of reliable law-maintainers in certain British colonies and settlements played an equal vital role in the Sikh diaspora. Arunajeet Kaur entertains the idea that the activities of Chinese secret societies in the Straits Settlements seriously disturbed the colonial rule there and harmed British interests. To wipe out the criminals and to maintain social order, Sikh constables were introduced.⁷ The crown colony of Hong Kong and the International Settlement of Shanghai also experienced similar troubles, and their solutions bear no difference from the Straits Settlements.⁸

The Eurocentric perspective can also be detected from studies that turn back to the Sikh motherland, the Punjab, to look for alternative explanations of the Sikh migration. Verne A. Dusenbery argues that the socio-economic milieu of the Punjab in the late nineteenth century gave rise to the large-scale Sikh migration.⁹ The Punjab had undergone dramatic transformations since the 1860s. The British introduced agricultural infrastructures remarkably changed the economic condition of the Sikh peasants. As lands had been accumulated into the hands of rich landowners, most Sikh peasants were drawn into debt. The strong desire to help their families get out of the indebtedness, as Dusenbery elaborates, was the principal cause of their migration.

Whether it is the pushing factors such as the poverty in the Punjab or the pulling factors such as the needs of overseas settlement countries, it seems that colonial authorities were always the dominant element that directed the migration, while the Sikh migrants were merely subjects who were unable to initiate their own diaspora. In this explanatory framework, the Sikhs were always waiting for some outsiders, the British in particular, to create a

condition, whether it was the needs of overseas colonies or the specific socio-economic milieu shaped by the Government of India, for their migration. This Eurocentric narrative “refuses to take an inquiry into the extent and nature of free will within the general structure of human society.”¹⁰

In an effort to recover the subjectivity of the Sikhs and meanwhile, to fully illustrate the diasporic experience of the Sikhs, this study argues that the usually employed macro-analysis that underscores the structure and context is far from enough, and that the microscopic approach might be a good complementary means for us to understand the migration process.

Similar to biographical writings, the microhistory bases its strength on analyzing the trajectory of individual’s life. Yet, it distinguishes itself by paying specific attention to the negotiation and interaction between the individual and the world he/she resides in. If the individual is the protagonist in a biography, the microhistory’s priority lies in the social and cultural canvas the individual gets entangled in.¹¹

Although some classics such as Natalie Davis’ *The Return of Martine Guerre* and Carlo Ginzburg’s *Cheese and Worms* are more or less local stories, a surging interest in employing microscopic approach to investigate transnational histories has been observed in recent years. Practitioners who are studying the Atlantic history have long tried to elucidate unacknowledged and unobserved aspects of the African migration through telling stories of cross-boundary lives.¹² Historians with interest in cross-cultural interactions have also turned their attention to micro-levels.¹³ World historians have recently campaigned for the idea of the global microhistory, which tends to use specific individuals to illustrate broad historical structure and process.¹⁴

The study of Sikh diaspora would be greatly benefited from the approach of the global microhistory. On the one hand, it scrutinizes the Sikh diaspora through the lens of the transnational network, and thus provides an alternative view apart from the motherland-settlement dichotomy paradigm. On the other hand, different from the prevalent Eurocentric explanatory framework that treats the Sikhs as passive subjects in their migration, the microhistorical analysis not only sketches out the specific living world the Sikh migrants inhabited, but also sheds light on how the Sikhs interacted, negotiated, and even utilized the structure for their own interests.

The present study takes the case of Isser Singh, a Sikh constable who served in the Shanghai Municipal Police from 1906 to 1911, as an example to exhibit the specific context of the Sikh migration in Shanghai. As a microhistory, it contends that individuals such as Isser Singh were not voiceless subjects who were constantly under the manipulation of colonial authorities. Instead, the Sikh migrants played crucial role in shaping policies in various colonies. Furthermore, the Sikhs were too ready to exploit the colonial network to pursue their own interests. As a transnational history, it entertains that facilities and provisions for the Sikh constables in Shanghai were neither novel nor locally invented but products of transnational circulation of institutions, knowledge, and information.

A Peasant's Son in the Punjab

Given that no letter, diary and memoir have been found yet, primary sources on the Sikh constables in the S.M.P. are mostly government archives, newspapers, and court testimonies. The case of Isser Singh is no exception, as information on this man scatter around news reports about daily crimes and court investigations. By reorganizing these primary sources and by referring to contemporary context, following contents try to reconstruct the trajectory of Isser Singh's diasporic experience and the world he inhabited in.

Neither Isser Singh himself nor newspapers indicate from which part of the Punjab this Sikh man came. Since Isser took part in a strike organized by the Sikhs from the Majha region of the Punjab to protest against the Shanghai Municipal Council's (S.M.C. thereafter) decision to remove a Majha Sikh interpreter in July 1910, he was most probably from a village in Majha, central Punjab.¹⁵ Actually, in the early twentieth century, nearly 70% of the Sikh constables in the S.M.P. were from the Majha region, while the others were mainly from the Malwa region, also in central Punjab.¹⁶ Majha Sikhs and Malwa Sikhs dominated Sikh police forces in other regions as well. The heavy concentration on specific regions was not a coincidence but had local socio-economic contexts.

Given that Punjab was annexed by the British shortly after the second Anglo-Sikh in 1848, the socio-economic structure of this area had undergone a dramatic change. During the period of the Sikh kingdom, most adult high-caste (largely Jat) Sikh males were professional military men in the Khalsa.¹⁷ After the defeat of the Sikh army, the British authority in the Punjab set out to take steps to disarm the Sikh soldiers in fear that they would rise against the British rule. Several thousand Sikh soldiers in the Khalsa were then ordered to hand over their weapons and were disbanded.¹⁸ The only alternative for these unemployed men was to "exchange the sword for the plough" to become peasants.¹⁹

Now that there were more laborers working on the lands, and the weather in the Punjab was highly suitable for cultivation, agricultural production increased remarkably.²⁰ Continuous harvests, however, failed to serve the Sikh peasants well, owing to the fall of agricultural product prices.²¹ Since the British authority in the Punjab taxed the Sikhs not in kinds as the Sikh Kingdom used to do but in cash, a sharp downturn of the crop price led to the bankruptcy of many peasants who failed to sell their products in the markets at a good price.²² As a result, the peasants had to resort to moneylenders and thus drew themselves into indebtedness and poverty.

To pacify the turbulent Sikh peasants, and to withstand Russia's threat from Central Asia, the British authority spent more than three million pounds to build infrastructures throughout the region in the 1850s.²³ By the eve of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, 3,600 miles of roads had been built and several canals that irrigated once barren areas had been accomplished.²⁴ Extensive roads and railways linked the Punjab with the outside world, especially with the port of

Karachi, from where Punjabi agricultural products could be exported to other parts of South Asia and beyond.²⁵

Thanks to the large-scale infrastructural building, the agricultural economy of the Punjab was opened to the global market.²⁶ As this market-oriented transformation enticed capital from other parts of India to flow in, Sikh peasants were further marginalized. Cultivable lands had become concentrated into the hands of a few Hindu and Muslim large landholders and moneylenders. Contrary to this trend, the majority of Sikh peasants merely held small tracts of lands. In the Majha region where Isser Singh probably resided, less than 35% of the lands were cultivated by tenants.²⁷ In other words, the majority of the lands were tilled by landholders themselves whose lands were too small to lease out. Malcolm Darling attributes the smallholdings of Sikhs peasants to the Sikh traditional law of dividing a father's land equally among his sons.²⁸ In this sense, even if a Sikh peasant held a medium size land, this land would be divided into pieces among his descendants. Therefore, the fragmentation of family lands was inevitable among the Sikh population.²⁹

As small proprietors, the Sikh peasants were exposed to various disadvantages. Firstly, they had to face fierce competition from large landowners whose agricultural products could be sold at a relatively cheaper price because of the larger scale of sale. Furthermore, the small peasants had no choice but to till the lands by their own hands in order to feed their families and pay the tax. This self-feed work enforced the Sikhs to bear the risks of illness, bad weather and other accidents.³⁰ To improve their condition, Sikh peasants also resorted to enlarging their holdings via borrowing money from moneylenders. The consequence of the rampant borrowing was that almost all Sikh small holding peasants were more or less indebted by the turn of the twentieth century.³¹

Borrowing money to buy more lands was not the sole reason that trapped the Sikh peasants into indebtedness, there are also some other factors. Throughout the colonial period, female infanticide was notoriously rampant among the Sikh population in the Punjab. As a result, there was a shortage of women for young Sikh males to marry with. And those who desired to have a wife had few choices but to spend usually around 1,000 to 2,000 rupees to buy one.³²

In addition to purchasing a bride, the Sikhs also had the tradition of holding luxurious wedding ceremonies that would put even heavier economic burden on the husband's family. The wedding for the Sikhs in the Punjab was not merely to invite guests to attend a ceremony. Instead, sumptuous dishes should be prepared, entertainment activities should also be provided, and most importantly, jewelry and clothes should be purchased for the bride. Therefore, another 1,000 rupees would be spent on the marriage.³³ Facing with such an enormous amount of expenditure, a common Sikh peasant family that only had on average 500 rupees in savings had to resort to borrowing, trapping themselves in the hands of moneylenders. Overall, purchasing land and arranging for marriages would usually exhaust whole of the savings of a typical Sikh household and draw the family into indebtedness.

It is very possible that Isser Singh was from a common peasant family that merely owned tiny tracts of lands. Like most Sikh households in the Punjab, Isser's family was also in trouble due to indebtedness, whether because of purchasing more land, or preparing a wedding ceremony, or constructing a brick house. To alleviate the debt burden, the Sikhs normally had to find supplementary source of income in addition to laboring on the land.

One of the main solutions was to encourage young male members of the family to join the Indian Army. By the turn of the twentieth century, a soldier in the Indian Army could earn 84 rupees a year, much more than earnings in agricultural work.³⁴ Furthermore, the authority promised that those servicemen could obtain considerable size of lands in newly developed canal colonies after a decade long service in the army.³⁵

Although joining the army was more promising than cultivating the lands, not every Sikh had equal chance to be enlisted. Apart from the adventurous spirit, the Sikhs in the Indian Army should be from specific sects of the Sikh population. Sikh peasants, who resided densely in the Majha region of central Punjab, were particularly preferred by recruiting agents on the grounds that the British assumed that they maintained the martial tradition of Sikhism and were physically sturdy owing to their harsh living environment.³⁶

As a Majha Sikh who intended to add wealth to his household, Isser offered himself to the Indian Army and was enlisted. He was assigned to the 74th Punjabis Infantry Regiment based in Bellary with a monthly salary at Rs.7.³⁷ Compared with income from agricultural work, the payment of the army was very good. However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Indian Army repeatedly warned that the reserve of its Sikh soldiers was draining, and that it could no longer employ qualified Sikhs in the near future. The Government of India attributed the drainage of its recruiting pool to the migration of the Sikhs to other parts of the world, particularly colonies in Southeast and East Asia that provided the Sikhs with much higher wage than the Indian army authorities could do.³⁸

Indeed, after the Indian Mutiny, the British military officers had gradually developed an ideology of the "martial race", which characterized certain group of people as robust fighters adept in military activities. The Sikhs, according to the British definition, were typical of the martial race.³⁹ As British officers who earlier served in India brought this ideology to other parts of the Empire and advertised the extraordinary traits of the Sikhs, other colonies expressed remarkable enthusiasm for recruiting the Sikh people to defend their territories and maintain social order with competitive payment.⁴⁰ The table below illustrates annual salaries for the Sikhs serving in colonial police forces and the Indian Army by the turn of the twentieth century.

Table 1: Annual Salary of Sikhs in Police and Army

Singapore Police	Hong Kong Police	Shanghai Police	Indian Army
Rs.272/year	Rs.377/year	Rs.525/year	Rs.84/year

Although Isser was serving in the army, he was well informed on those overseas opportunities, thanks to the Sikh diasporic network that facilitated the circulation of information. Tony Ballantyne denotes the Sikhs diasporic network as a web that not merely linked the Punjab with specific overseas settlement, but also connected various settlements with each other. In this web, Sikh migrants moved from one area to the other, and so did their experience and knowledge of these areas.⁴¹ On that account, the Sikhs in one city were able to know the payment of the other city very soon as the people were constantly on the move. For example, in February 1901, the Superintendent of the Shanghai Municipal Police (S.M.P. thereafter) asked the S.M.C. to increase the salary of the staffs in the police force. The main reason he gave to the council members was that Sikh constables in the S.M.P. had recently obtained a piece of information about the rise of salary of the Sikh staffs in the Hong Kong Police. The Sikhs in Shanghai were frustrated by the fact that the S.M.P. did not harbor any plan to increase their salary accordingly. Furthermore, the Superintendent warned that potential candidates with qualified characteristics would probably be attracted by higher salaries in Hong Kong, and would cease to come to Shanghai to look for jobs. After hearing the report of the Superintendent, members of the S.M.C. unanimously agreed to consider a salary improvement scheme, although the budget of the administration was very tight that year.⁴²

However, the S.M.C. should not blame the Hong Kong government for this economic burden. Indeed, in January 1901, news on the rising salary of the Sikh constables in Singapore spread to Hong Kong and stirred strong emotion among servicemen there. Staffs in the Hong Kong Police correspondingly appealed for an equal rise in their salary. For fear that its servicemen could relocate to Singapore for better payment, the Hong Kong government sanctioned to increase its police officers' salary by 17%, increasing it at the same rate with that of Singapore's.⁴³

The information also spread back to India in the forms of letters or oral messages.⁴⁴ The returnees took their overseas experience with them as well, and were too ready to share what they saw, how they felt, and how much they earned abroad with their relatives, neighbors and friends.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, advertisements posted by shipment companies, newspapers and magazines also played roles in circulating this information.⁴⁶

Being exposed to the information of the outside world, Isser had gradually realized that he could earn much more money overseas. After a serious consideration, he left the army and returned to his village and to prepare for overseas migration around 1905 or 1906. Like other Sikhs who desired to go

abroad, Isser began to optimize his migration plan by scrutinizing possible destinations.⁴⁷

Optimizing the Migration Plan

By the turn of the twentieth century, most Sikh migrants favored Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai as their destinations, mainly because they provided relatively good payments. Since all three cities had high demand for Sikhs for policing work, competition was inevitable.

In the late nineteenth century, the average annual salary of a Sikh constable in Singapore was around 120 Mexican dollars.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, a Sikh constable serving in the Hong Kong Police was able to earn 166 Hong Kong dollars annually.⁴⁹ Their contemporaries working in the Shanghai Municipal Police could obtain 168 Shanghai taels each year.⁵⁰ For meeting their personal daily needs, salaries for the Sikhs in all three cities were high enough, and much better than the earnings of local people.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the Sikhs earned the money not solely for themselves, but to a larger extent, for their families in the Punjab. For this reason, they had to transfer their earnings from local currencies into Indian rupees. Table 2 below illustrates the annual salary in Indian rupees that the Sikh constables could obtain in the three places in the 1900s.

Table 2: Salaries of Sikh Policemen in Rupees

Singapore ⁵²	Hong Kong ⁵³	Shanghai ⁵⁴
MD\$120/year	HKD\$166/year	Tls. 168/year
Rs.200/year	Rs.237/year	Rs.525/year

Thus after converting to rupees, we can see that Sikh constables working in Shanghai were able to earn Rs.525 a year, much higher than those in Singapore (Rs.200) and Hong Kong (Rs.237). This gap explicitly indicates that the Sikhs in Shanghai could transfer much more money back home than their countrymen serving in the two crown colonies.

Governments in Singapore and Hong Kong understood well that the weak exchange rate between their currencies and the rupees had imposed remarkable negative effects on their ability to recruit the Sikhs. To counterbalance this disadvantage, the Hong Kong government chose to allow their Sikh constables to remit their pay home at a fixed rate of exchange of 44 Hong Kong dollars to Rs.100.⁵⁵ The Singapore government, at the same time, pleaded with the Secretary of State in London to take measures to control the widely varying exchange rate compensation in the British Empire. As the plea was declined by the Secretary of State, Singapore imitated Hong Kong's policy that allowed their Sikh staffs to transfer their salary at the rate of 44 Mexican dollars to Rs.100.⁵⁶ Table 3 below illustrates Sikh constables' salaries in Hong Kong,

Singapore and Shanghai after Singapore and Hong Kong governments implemented the exchange compensation policy.

Table 3: Sikh Policemen Salaries after Compensation

Singapore	Hong Kong	Shanghai
MD\$120/year	HKD\$166/year	Tls. 168/year
Rs.272/year	Rs.377/year	Rs.525/year

As the exchange rates were raised, Singapore's Sikh constables were able to remit Rs.272 to India rather than merely Rs.200. And their Hong Kong counterparts could remit Rs.377 instead of Rs.237. Nonetheless, the compensated payments were still much lower than that provided by the S.M.C.

The relatively generous payment the Sikhs obtained in Shanghai was, indeed, deliberately set by policymakers there for maintaining the edge over its competitors. Well informed about the differential in Sikh salaries in Hong Kong and Singapore, the S.M.C. promised to provide a higher allowance for attracting qualified Sikhs.⁵⁷

The deep gap in income among various areas reshaped the landscape of Sikh migration in the early twentieth century. Given that the Sikh people in Punjab were highly aware that Shanghai was a city where their countrymen could earn much more money than others working elsewhere, they all rushed to Shanghai. In 1906, the Singapore government had observed that fewer and fewer Sikhs arrived in Singapore and offered themselves to the local police force.⁵⁸ Three years later, the situation in Singapore became worse as the police force could neither recruit more Sikhs from the Punjab nor keep their Sikh staffs in their positions. The head of the Singapore police force admitted that most Sikh people in the Punjab were reluctant to come to Singapore because some Far Eastern cities, particularly Hong Kong and Shanghai, offered greater attraction.⁵⁹

Since the Hong Kong Police provided relatively higher salaries than the Singapore government did, Sikhs kept migrating to Hong Kong in the first decade of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, many of those who came to Hong Kong were either physically unsuitable for policing work or sought every chance to be dismissed in order to migrate to other regions where they could earn more money. For example, attempting to strengthen its own defense, the S.M.C. attracted more than twenty Sikh constables from the Hong Kong Police with a higher salary and allowance in a single year.⁶⁰ Moreover, knowing that their fellows could earn more money in Shanghai, Sikh constables still serving in the Hong Kong Police even went on strike in order to pressure the authority to increase their salaries.⁶¹ Table 4 below illustrates that a high percentage of the newly recruited Sikh constables were dismissed shortly after they arrived in Hong Kong.

Table 4: Employment Practices among Sikh Policemen in Hong Kong

	1903 ⁶²	1904 ⁶³	1905 ⁶⁴	1906 ⁶⁵	1907 ⁶⁶
Engaged Sikh constables	64	93	70	115	59
Dismissed Sikh constables	61	83	58	74	52

Since the S.M.C. provided their Sikh staffs with competitive payments, the Sikhs in the Punjab were enthusiastic about looking for jobs in Shanghai. As a result, when the Singapore government complained that very few Sikh people offered themselves to its police force in the mid-1900s, the S.M.C boasted that very little difficulty was experienced in them getting suitable Sikh recruits.⁶⁷ Indeed, as the S.M.C. observed, “the influx of Sikhs and natives of India into Shanghai is constantly increasing.”⁶⁸

Table 5: Strength of Sikh Police Forces in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai between 1901 and 1909⁶⁹

	Singapore	Hong Kong	Shanghai
1901	152	366	172
1902	160	367	187
1903	166	367	187
1904	171	375	209
1905	184	482	235
1906	184	410	235
1907	184	410	511
1908	188	388	555
1909	179	380	550

As the table above well illustrates, the strength of Sikh police forces in Singapore and Hong Kong was nearly in stagnation in the first decade of the Twentieth century. The strength of Singapore’s Sikh police increased 17.7% between 1901 and 1909. The expansion rate for Hong Kong’s Sikh unit is even lower, merely at 3.8%. In contrast, the Sikh branch in the S.M.P. experienced a dramatic expansion during these years, with its strength increasing by 219%.

Owing to the Sikh diasporic network, this updated information probably reached Isser very quickly when he was preparing his migration. Understandably, Shanghai became Isser’s primary choice. Normally, there were two channels for the Sikhs in the Punjab to find jobs in Shanghai. If they had friends or relatives who had already worked in Shanghai, they could travel to this city by themselves and ask their friends and relatives to recommend them for certain positions.⁷⁰ If they did not know anyone there, their chance of getting a position depended on the recruitment of the S.M.C. in the Punjab. Most Sikhs preferred to travel using their own money on the grounds that the

S.M.C. did not frequently sent agents to the Punjab to undertake recruitment. This migration pattern, however, was reshaped by the changing policy of the Government of India in the 1900s.

The Government of India had long been perturbed by the fact that its recruiting ground in the Punjab was being depleted by overseas demands. Also, Sikhs working for other European powers greatly thwarted attempts by the Government of India.⁷¹ In the year of 1903, the Government of India asked other colonies in the British Empire to employ Sikhs only through the agents of the Indian Army. In other words, other colonial authorities were no longer allowed to recruit Sikhs who offered themselves to police forces.⁷² Although the International Settlement of Shanghai was not officially a part of the British Empire, the S.M.C. agreed to enlist its Sikh constables from the Punjab in 1905, owing to its frustration over the work of the local recruited Sikhs.⁷³

The Road to Shanghai

In December 1905, a riot that was aggravated by anti-foreign sentiment broke out in Shanghai.⁷⁴ As foreigners were injured and foreign buildings were burnt, the S.M.C. came to realize that its policing strength was too weak to protect the Settlement, and that an augmentation of the S.M.P. was inevitable.⁷⁵ Since the Sikh police had proved the most faithful and energetic throughout the riot, a dramatic expansion of the Sikh branch was proposed.⁷⁶

Based on the new recruitment policy, the S.M.C. submitted an application to the Government of India for enlisting 40 Sikh policemen in January 1906.⁷⁷ The Government of India sanctioned the request months later and instructed the Indian Army's recruiting depot in Amritsar to assign a recruiting team that was composed of native officers and guides to execute the recruitment.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, to keep track of the enlistment, the S.M.P. sent its police cadet A. H. Fenton and an Indian sergeant to India in October 1906.⁷⁹

The recruiting team and Fenton visited specific villages in the Manjha area that normally provided soldiers to the Indian Army. The village where Isser Singh may have resided was among those that the recruiters visited. Understanding that the S.M.C. provided relatively higher payment than other colonial authorities, Isser Singh offered himself to the recruiters.

The S.M.C.'s criteria for selecting constables were modeled on the standard of the Indian Army. The preferred candidate should be a Majha Sikh, at least 63 inches high, and his chest girth should not less than 35 inches.⁸⁰ As an ex-soldier, Isser Singh met all of these requirements and was thus enlisted.

The recruiting team brought Isser and other recruits to Amritsar, from where a train took them to Lahore. Meanwhile, staffs from the S.M.P. had already been sent to Lahore to take the newly recruited Sikhs back to Shanghai.⁸¹ In Lahore, civil surgeon conducted a routine medical check on these recruits to make sure that their hearing, speech, and teeth were all satisfactory.⁸² Additionally, those who had syndromes of rupture, hydrocephalus, varicella, skin disease, and other chronic disease would be disqualified.⁸³ After the check, Isser and others travelled to Bombay by train

from where they boarded a passenger liner (owned by Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company that was contracted by the S.M.C. in the early twentieth century). The liner took the batch of Sikhs to Hong Kong before they finally arrived in Shanghai.⁸⁴

Accommodating the Sikhs

As Isser landed in Shanghai in November 1906, he found that there already existed a well-developed Sikh community with sophisticated facilities in this port city. A hospital that specifically catered for Sikh patients was set up long ago. A Sikh temple (Gurdwara) was under construction for meeting the religious needs of the Sikhs. The Police School regularly provided necessary trainings and education to the Sikh staffs. With the help of these facilities, the S.M.C. expected to build up the efficiency of its Sikh police unit. In fact, the idea of providing the Sikh police staffs with customized facilities was not Shanghai's original invention. By the turn of the twentieth century, the S.M.C. had imported and localized numerous Sikh-related institutions from Hong Kong and Singapore. In other words, the hospital, gurdwara, and school were products of a transnational network that facilitated the circulation of knowledge from one region to the other.

Viewing the Sikhs as a martial race who could easily adapt to harsh climate, the colonial authorities in Southeast and East Asia had sanctioned to employ them. Ironically, the British soon found that the Sikhs were particularly susceptible to tropical diseases, particularly malaria and dengue fever. In the Hong Kong Police, the Sikhs always accounted for a large proportion of the total number of patients admitted to the hospital.

Table 6: Police staffs admitted to the hospital in Hong Kong, 1901-1909

	Europeans	Sikhs	Chinese
1901 ⁸⁵	163	493	215
1902 ⁸⁶	141	498	299
1903 ⁸⁷	122	407	193
1904 ⁸⁸	111	317	226
1905 ⁸⁹	102	407	187
1906 ⁹⁰	98	375	224
1907 ⁹¹	132	427	187
1908 ⁹²	97	394	136
1909 ⁹³	72	471	136

The Singapore government was also concerned by the unhealthy condition of its Sikh constables. A government survey showed that the Sikhs were particularly susceptible to phthisis and intermittent fever in this tropical island, and that the Sikhs had a larger proportion of sick than other contingents.⁹⁴ In a report of the Inspector-General of Police in 1909, the Sikh contingent was

claimed to be the least healthy one.⁹⁵ Sikh constables in Shanghai were also mired by health problems in the early twentieth century. Annual Reports of the S.M.C. showed that the Sikhs were frequently taken to hospital due to various diseases and cases of death were not uncommonly seen.⁹⁶

Various measures had been taken by colonial authorities to improve their Sikh policemen's health. Since the 1860s, the Hong Kong government had begun to import medicines from India to treat the Sikh patients.⁹⁷ Besides, all ailing Sikhs were taken to the Government Civil Hospital for treatment.⁹⁸ In Singapore, a police surgeon was appointed to take charge of the health of all Sikh policemen. Those who were suffering serious diseases were admitted into the government funded General Hospital.⁹⁹ The hospital also provided specific Sikh diet to the patients.¹⁰⁰

What happened in Singapore and Hong Kong had indicated that the Sikhs were particularly vulnerable to diseases in Southeast and East Asia, and that customized provisions should be provided to relieve the Sikh police's health problem. The S.M.C. learned the lessons well and was cautious about the medical care of its Sikh staffs. At the time when Isser arrived in Shanghai, the S.M.P., like its Singapore counterpart, also enlisted a police surgeon to take care of the Sikh policemen.¹⁰¹ Ailing Sikh staffs in the S.M.P. would be checked by the surgeon and could go to the General Hospital (founded by the S.M.C.) without any charge.¹⁰² To better accommodate the Sikh population, the S.M.C. even built an Indian Hospital in 1919. The medical authority in that hospital introduced Singapore's measure to provide specific Sikh food to its patients. Furthermore, wives and children of the Sikh constables were allowed to come to the hospital for treatment.¹⁰³

In addition to the well-built medical facility, the S.M.C. also provided training and education to the Sikhs. In the first six months, all newly recruited Sikhs were compulsorily requested to attend classes in English and Chinese languages, musketry shooting, and policing regulations in an Indian school that was set up by the S.M.C. in 1896.¹⁰⁴ These schooling institutions, like the medical care system, were also imitated from other colonies.

Once the Hong Kong government established its Sikh branch in 1868, a Sikh police school was simultaneously introduced by the Governor to instruct its Sikh constables how to use musketry and to teach colloquial English and Chinese languages.¹⁰⁵ Language learning in the school had later been made an important condition in the promotion of the Sikh staffs. Only those who passed the tests could be promoted to higher positions.¹⁰⁶ The curriculum in the school had gradually been developed, as courses such as Police Regulation and General Instructions, Sections and Beats, Local Knowledge, Police Court Routine, Observation Lessons, Jiu Jihsu-Police Holds, Physical Drill, and First Aid to Injured were all taught to the Sikh policemen.¹⁰⁷

The Sikh police school in Singapore was to a large extent modeled on that of Hong Kong's. When the Singapore government planned to set up its Sikh contingent in 1879, Hong Kong's experience in employing and managing the Sikh police unit was the principal reference. As a result, a Sikh police school

was built in 1881 and the Sikh servicemen were also required to take language exams.¹⁰⁸

The S.M.C. also looked towards Hong Kong for establishing a Sikh police school. To improve the efficiency of the Sikh branch, the S.M.C. repeatedly resorted to Hong Kong's expertise in schooling the Sikh constables. As early as 1885 when the first batch of the Sikhs arrived, the S.M.C. imitated the Hong Kong Police's measure by introducing courses on Chinese and English languages to all recruits.¹⁰⁹ As the Sikh branch had grown dramatically, the S.M.C. asked its police officers to go to Hong Kong for learning how to manage the Sikhs.¹¹⁰ Based on Hong Kong's model, a specific Sikh police school was established in 1896, and courses such as musketry shooting, police regulation instruction, and local knowledge were introduced.¹¹¹

Given that the Sikhs derived their identity closely based on their religion, Sikhism, most of them aspired to keep practicing their religious rituals in *gurdwaras* (Sikh temples) even when they were abroad. As more and more Sikhs migrated to Southeast and East Asia by the turn of the twentieth century, *gurdwaras* sprang up in these regions.¹¹² The first *gurdwara* in the Straits Settlements was set up in Penang in 1901 for commemorating the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria.¹¹³ It is reported at that time that the *gurdwara* in Penang would be used to serve religious needs for the Sikhs not only in the Straits Settlements but also those in the Malay Peninsula.¹¹⁴

The Hong Kong authority was well informed of the construction of the *gurdwara* in the Straits Settlements and felt the imperative need of building one for its own Sikh servicemen.¹¹⁵ In 1902, one year after the erection of Penang's *gurwara*, a Sikh temple was set up in Gap Road of Wanchai, Hong Kong. Whereas the Hong Kong government provided a site without any charge, money for establishing the building was raised among local Sikh soldiers, policemen, and watchmen.¹¹⁶

Noticeably, the S.M.C. also donated some 600 HK dollars for the *gurdwara* in Wanchai.¹¹⁷ In fact, the S.M.C. had a desire to improve its Sikh constables' morale and efficiency in the first decade of the twentieth century. In assuming that a religious organization would watch over and correct the behavior of the Sikhs, the S.M.C. had a growing interest in the work of Hong Kong's *gurdwara*.¹¹⁸

After years' consideration and observance, the S.M.C. sanctioned the plan to build a *gurdwara* in 1906.¹¹⁹ Staffs were soon dispatched to Hong Kong to learn about the details of the building. Blueprints and plans of Hong Kong's *gurdwara* were also obtained and taken back to Shanghai.¹²⁰

Based on the model of Hong Kong, a two floor high *gurdwara* was erected in the North Szechuen Road in June 1908.¹²¹ The S.M.C. expected that the temple could greatly facilitate its administration over all Sikhs in Shanghai, including policemen, watchmen, and the unemployed. With the help of the priests in the *gurdwara*, the authority wanted to impose religious teachings on their Sikh subjects and thus to set right the rampageous misconduct. Furthermore, the temple provided accommodation for the destitute and other

Sikhs with no home. Disputes among the Sikhs were also brought to the temple for resolution rather than resorting to the court.¹²²

Isser Singh arrived in Shanghai at an age when all these sophisticated facilities were already in place. Like all other Sikhs, he immediately received trainings on policing knowledge, which was based on Indian government's police training books.¹²³ In the first six months, Isser had to take the English course three times a week.¹²⁴ Since the S.M.C. repeatedly defined its police unit as a defensive force that should be deployed to protect the Settlement during an emergency time, shooting courses were also introduced to the newly enlisted policemen.¹²⁵

After undergoing intensive training, Isser was assigned to the Hongkew station, responsible for checking unlawful activities in the Hongkew area. He was accommodated in a barrack that was specifically built by the S.M.C. for the newly employed Sikhs.¹²⁶ The barrack was closed for all outsiders and was more like a military fort on the grounds that the S.M.C. purported to build it as the center for the defense of the settlement.¹²⁷ Life in this building was doubtlessly boring, and the eight-hour work on the streets chasing after thieves, directing the transport, and arresting drunkards was both dangerous and exhausting.

As regards the Sikhs in Shanghai at that time, the most common use of off-work leisure time, as temporary escape from laborious life, was consumption of alcohol. Indeed, Sikhs living in the Punjab had a tradition of over-drinking to relax their exhausted bodies after hard work.¹²⁸ In the early twentieth century, a social survey illustrated that one hundred Jat Sikhs could consume 5 gallons of spirit on average per year, while the provincial average was merely 2.25 gallons.¹²⁹ Migrants brought this habit abroad. In Singapore, the authority attributed the misconduct of its Sikh constables mainly to their widespread drunkenness.¹³⁰ The overconsumption of alcohol also existed widely among the Sikh population in Hong Kong. One of the crucial reasons why the Hong Kong government enthusiastically advocated Sikhism was that beliefs of Sikhism prohibited the Sikhs from over-drinking.¹³¹ There was no exception for the Sikhs in Shanghai, as drunk-related cases were frequently heard in the court.¹³² The S.M.C. even claimed, "drunkenness is the most common crime for the Sikhs."¹³³ Like his fellows, Isser occasionally indulged himself in spirits as well. Ironically, one of Isser's main jobs was to check drunkards on the streets.

Policing Hongkew

Isser executed his duty in Hongkew, the northern part of the International Settlement. The Hongkew region was mainly under the administration of the American concession between 1848 and 1863. As the American concession was combined with the British concession in 1863, Hongkew became a part of the International Settlement, albeit it was less secured than other parts of the settlement.¹³⁴ In the early twentieth century, Hongkew was notorious for

crimes and troubles that were caused by sailors who landed there for entertainment. To keep these seamen at bay was Isser's imperative job.

On the mid-night of December 19, 1906, Isser was patrolling alone the Yuhang Road, Hongkew when he saw an American cruiser sailor being drunk and disorderly. As Isser tried to keep this man under his custody, the drunkard assaulted Isser. A tussle ensued, and thanks to his former experience as a soldier, the American was soon brought under control and taken to the police station.¹³⁵ On May 23, 1907, a Russian cruiser sailor was lying in the Boone Road under the influence of alcohol and obstructing the traffic. On call, Isser rushed to the spot and made the arrest. The man was later sent back to his ship for punishment.¹³⁶

In addition to checking drunkards, Isser was also in charge of certain civilizing missions. Since the late nineteenth century, the S.M.C. had implemented a set of rules to attempt to discipline "uncivilized" elements in the settlement. The police were required to inspect noises, unsanitary behavior, and beggars. Unmuzzled dogs straying on streets, a source of threat to residents, had to be taken to the police station and dog owners would be fined.¹³⁷ On the morning of June 30th, 1907, Isser caught a dog that was straying in North Szechuen Road with no people aside. On his way back to the police station, the dog's master came out and asked for his dog. Although the man insisted that it was Isser who enticed his dog onto the road, the court still fined him \$10 for leaving the dog unmuzzled.¹³⁸

As the above records demonstrate, Isser behaved convincingly during his six-months probationary service between November of 1906 and May of 1907 and was thereby promoted into the rank of the 6th class constable. His monthly salary at that time was around \$16.5 (Mexican dollars). Apart from the cash earning, Isser also enjoyed some other forms of benefits such as free uniforms, fuel and light.¹³⁹ In the year of 1905, the S.M.C. even employed three Sikh cooks to prepare Punjabi food for the Sikhs.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, if Isser kept performing in such a satisfactory way, he had a high chance of being promoted to the rank of a 5th class constable one year later.¹⁴¹ However, lack of sufficient knowledge on rules and regulations promulgated by the S.M.C. impaired Isser's career in the unit.

"A Man Who Gives Considerable Trouble"

In May of 1907, the Chairman of the S.M.C. received a letter from the Shanghai Taotai, the magistrate of the Chinese territory in Shanghai. It was a complaint about the action of an Indian constable who crossed into the Chinese territory with a gun and thereby caused disturbance among the public.¹⁴² Further reports from Chinese newspapers elaborated that the Indian constable was invited by a Chinese hooligan to enter into the Chinese territory for the purpose of bullying some other shopkeepers. With the help of the Indian, the hooligan also beat up a Chinese policeman who had come to check the case.¹⁴³ Assuming that the Indian constable was either privately employed by the Chinese hooligan or deputed by the S.M.C. to deliberately breach the Chinese

law, the enraged Chinese authority required the S.M.C. to fully investigate this incident and punish that Indian.¹⁴⁴

The subsequent investigation conducted by the S.M.C. unveiled that the Indian constable was Isser Singh. Isser stated that he was patrolling the Wuchow Road on Apr. 29, 1907 when a Chinese came to him, reporting that a lot of loafers were in his house outside the Settlement. Isser then came with that man to go to the spot but found no one was there. He returned to his duty immediately afterwards. Based on this statement, the S.M.C. judged that the accusation from the Chinese side had been much exaggerated and that there was no need to pay more heed to this issue.¹⁴⁵ Whereas Isser had been spared from taking accountability for the cross-boundary incident, he undoubtedly left a negative impression on his fellow officers, as the Captain of the Sikh branch later commented, "he (Isser Singh) had given his officers considerable trouble".¹⁴⁶

On August 2 1907, Isser refused to follow an order to go on duty with the excuse that he had lost money in the barrack and had been unfairly treated by senior Sikh officers. Disobeying senior officers' orders was not uncommon among the Sikh constables in Shanghai. In the early twentieth century, the S.M.C. kept complaining about the deteriorating discipline in its Sikh branch.¹⁴⁷ More often than not, the authority chose to appease its Sikh staffs, owing to its heavy reliance on the Sikhs for defending the Settlement.¹⁴⁸ For example, on May 28 1908, two Sikh constables disobeyed the order of an Indian sergeant-major, and one of them even used abusive and filthy language to attack the officer. Although both were presented to the police court, the sentences imposed on them were quite light, as one was jailed merely for three days with hard labor and the other was jailed for seven days with hard labor.¹⁴⁹ In contrast, Isser Singh was imprisoned for one month with hard labor, mainly because the court judged him as a troublemaker in the police unit.¹⁵⁰ When Isser was released in September 1907, the judge gave him two choices: he could either return to the Sikh branch by finding two sureties in \$500 each or return to India.¹⁵¹ With the help of his friends, Isser successfully found two sureties and it was agreed that he could resume his work in the police force.

In the next three years, Isser obviously took a less passionate interest towards his job than before. He no longer caught any drunkards on streets, however, nor did he cross boundaries or cause any trouble during this period.

In July 1910, however, Isser was again imprisoned, owing to his participation in a strike resulting from rivalries between different factions of Sikhs in Shanghai. There were largely two main factions of Sikhs serving in the S.M.P. in the early twentieth century. One faction was from the Mahja region, located between the Beas and the Ravi rivers of the Punjab; the other was from the Malwa region, located south of the Sutlej River of the Punjab.¹⁵² Although both factions shared the same religion and lived side-by-side in India, discrepant views on caste and locality and the conflict in economic interests brought about mutual discriminations, altercations and even clashes.¹⁵³ As people from both regions came abroad for livelihood, they also brought the old antagonism to the new lands.¹⁵⁴

In Shanghai, the hostilities between the two factions repeatedly irritated the S.M.C..¹⁵⁵ In July 1910, a Sikh interpreter who was from the Mahja faction was dismissed by the S.M.C.. It is rumored that the Malwa faction was behind this man's dismissal. Outraged Mahja Sikhs assembled in the Louza Police Station on the afternoon of July 15, 1910, demanding the restoration of the interpreter and to be granted more privileges. As a Mahja Sikh, Isser found that he had an obligation to stand with his co-regionalists and express his support. On the assumption that it was just a peaceful petition and that no serious consequence would be incurred, Isser headed to the Louza station from Hongkew that afternoon. However, after Captain Superintendent of the S.M.P. rejected a direct dialogue with the Mahja Sikhs, the gathered men refused to obey the command of their officers to dismiss but kept lamenting and pleading. The next day, all Sikhs involved in this parade, including Isser Singh, were arrested and taken to the British gaol.¹⁵⁶ Most of these men, however, were released a few days later, owing to the authority's unwillingness to stir anti-British sentiment among the Sikh population in Shanghai.¹⁵⁷ But Isser Singh was detained two extra days than the others with the allegation that this was the second time he disobeyed orders.¹⁵⁸ The S.M.C., recognizing that it did not want to lose a whole batch of experienced Sikh constables, and that the expenditure of deporting them back to India was extremely high, decided that almost all the detained Sikhs, including Isser, were to be reenlisted into the unit.

As Isser returned to work, catching drunkards on the streets, again, became an activity that he had to engage with. On March 16 1911, Isser saw a drunken Sikh lying on the East Hanbury Road and thereby took him back to the police station.¹⁵⁹ One month later, however, Isser himself shared a similar fate with the drunkard he had arrested. On the evening of April 13 1911, Isser was found heavily drunk and disorderly in North Szechuen Road. Affected by alcohol, he assaulted a Chinese by dragging him about the road. He was then arrested and sentenced to seven days' hard labor and a fine of \$10.¹⁶⁰

An Unending End

The drinking case, however, is the last piece of information on Isser Singh in Shanghai. Since then, no clue about Isser Singh has been found. It is very possible that he left Shanghai in 1911 as his term of service ended. The Sikh constables serving in the S.M.P. were normally contracted for five years. By the end of their service, they would be granted a nine-month leave on half pay with \$10 passage money. If the S.M.C. was satisfied with a constable's performance during the five-year term, he could return to the force after his leave.¹⁶¹ Obviously, in light of the misconducts Isser had undertaken in the past five years, he was not the kind of person that the S.M.C. intended to provide with a second term contract.

With the money he saved during the term, Isser probably returned to his village in the Punjab, and ended up as a farmer with adequate resources to support his family. The other possibility is that he further migrated to other

areas such as North America or the Far East of Russia. In the middle 1900s, rumors about higher earning opportunities in North America and Russia came to circulate among the Sikhs around the world. In the year of 1906 alone, 2,400 Sikhs in the Punjab migrated to Canada.¹⁶² Those who served overseas also turned their eyes to more lucrative areas. The Government of Hong Kong had long discerned that noticeable numbers of its Sikh servicemen left their positions to move to Port Arthur (Lv Shun) and Vladivostok, attracted by higher salaries there.¹⁶³ During the Russo-Japanese War, it was reported that some Sikhs who were captured by the Japanese in Port Arthur were migrants from the Straits Settlements.¹⁶⁴ In Shanghai, the authority reported, “many Sikhs resigned in order to go to Siberia or North America for better payment.”¹⁶⁵ And since the S.M.C. only allowed 20 Sikh policemen to purchase their discharge yearly,¹⁶⁶ some Sikh constables even deliberately undertook misconducts with the hope that they could get dismissed and proceed forthwith to America.¹⁶⁷ Taking this backdrop into account, the diasporic journey of Isser Singh could probably did not end in Shanghai.

In summary, the present study showcases that the decision made by Sikhs to travel from the Punjab to Shanghai was not as simple as it is often assumed to be. To fully understand the Sikh migration to Shanghai in the first decade of the twentieth century, a transnational approach has been employed. It is unveiled that the Sikhs made good use of the diasporic network to facilitate the circulation of information and population in order to pursue more economic interests. The S.M.C., in its turn, also relied on the colonial network for learning and introducing highly customized supplies and facilities to accommodate its Sikh staffs. Furthermore, a microscopic analysis on the Sikh constable Isser Singh sheds lights on the interaction, negotiation, and sometimes, even tension between specific individuals and the ambience he lived through.

By combining the transnational approach with the micro-level analytical method, this paper hopefully has provided a new perspective to make sense of the emerging Sikh diaspora during the colonial period. Instead of looking into the uni-directional interaction between the Punjab and certain overseas Sikh settlement, it argues that a network emerged that connected overseas Sikh settlements with each other gave rise to and constantly shaped the Sikh diaspora. And to better comprehend the mechanism of the network, a top-to-bottom approach is insufficient. Personal experience at the micro-level serves to illustrate the most detailed and unnoticed aspects of the network.

Notes

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¹¹ Carlo Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things that I know about it," *Critical Inquiry*, 1 (1993): 10-35. Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *The Journal of American History*, 1 (2001): 129-144. John Brewer, "Microhistory and the histories of everyday life," *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2010): 87-109.

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¹⁹ N. M. Khilnani, *British Power in the Punjab, 1839-1858* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1972), 178.

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²⁹ W. H. McLeod, "The first forty years of Sikh migration: Problems and some possible solutions," in N. G. Barrier and Verne Dusenbery eds., *The Sikh*

Diaspora: Migration and the Experience Beyond Punjab (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1989), 35.

³⁰ Sir Malcolm Darling, *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 28.

³¹ Royal Roseberry argues that the indebtedness of Punjabi peasants during the colonial period was also a result of high interest rate, often amounted up to 30% per year, see Royal Roseberry, *Imperial Rule in Punjab: The Conquest and Administration of Multan, 1818-1881* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1987), 224

³² Sir Malcolm Darling, *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 50.

³³ Sir Malcolm Darling, *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 54-56.

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